



## Things That Keep Me Awake At Night

*Rouba Mhaissen explains what it's like to manage a local humanitarian organization in Syria and the difficulties that come with the role.*

Back in 2011, I was doing my PhD in London, commuting back and forth to Beirut, when the first forty Syrian refugee families crossed over to Lebanon. I found out more information about these families from friends, and then all it took was a Whatsapp message to go viral, a group of volunteers and some good will for [SAWA for Development and Aid](#) to be born.

Fast forward five years exactly: the organization had grown and now supports people in dozens of camp settlements in Lebanon, working with communities through three core principles – dignity, ownership and agency. We support people in a holistic way, working with every single member of the family, for the benefit of the whole community. We work in relief, education, and development and livelihoods projects that are fully run by the Syrians themselves in the tented agglomerations.

As a 23-year-old Syrian Lebanese graduate student at that time, I had no idea of the mission I was setting out on. I just felt that it was my calling. My people had gone out in the streets to ask for freedom and dignity, and were now paying a high price for it- devoid not only of the right to a dignified living in their own country but also outside of it. I just felt that this is where I can be of help. But little did I know about the whole lifestyle package that came with it. While many people today shower me with support and love; while many share my Facebook posts, SAWA's success and feel proud of all the achievements, I feel like I owe it to each and every one to also share some of the things that have made my job a very difficult one. This is how it feels to head a local organization in times of war – hard. It feels really hard and here is why:

First, **Balance.**

Striking a balance has been one of the biggest challenges that I have faced throughout my time at SAWA. As we grew beyond just a group of friends, and into an organization with more than 50 staff and still counting, the lines between friends, volunteers, and professionals became harder to draw. While it is much easier to hire someone with a clear job description into a rigid hierarchical structure, it is much more difficult albeit dynamic and exciting to work with a group of passionate individuals in a fairly flat hierarchy where we all voice our ideas, concerns and opinions in an open and safe environment. This becomes harder and harder when the organization houses a group of radical activists who were forced by circumstances to become humanitarian workers and move away from the political arena.

How can we maintain a balance between openness, sharing with assertiveness and efficiency? How can we maintain the passion without losing the necessary structure and a minimal level of bureaucracy and institutionalization that is required for an NGO to function efficiently? How can the friendships that

started in the streets, demonstrations and hardships blossom while at the same time we ensure professionalism, accountability, and a separation of tasks?

**Compassion versus professionalism.** How can we expect people to function in an office environment when there is a mass genocide happening? If your friend has just died while being tortured, how can you be working at your most efficient? How can you sit and write a report to a donor in Europe when you feel like the whole world has given up on you? How can a team continue giving of themselves when they hear in their everyday work stories of torture, forced displacement, rape and killing? How can you enjoy a team building lunch after you have just distributed basic food rations to hundreds of starving families while thousands of others are still hungry? How can you ensure the team still has motivation?

**Guilt.** How can you overcome survival's guilt? It is okay to be alive, it is okay to earn a salary, it is okay. You are not betraying your comrades, your co-citizens, it is okay. Psychosocial support for the team is needed – but there is no budget for it. And speaking of budgets, how should we manage an over-worked, under-paid, under-staffed, all-activist team when the need is immense and the team works wholeheartedly, forgetting to put themselves first. For us, it's not a 9-5 job. How can we employ more people when we have to fight daily with donors to give core funding for local organizations to be able to hire people (although they don't mind taking some for their own use but assume locals should just work for free)? These and more are all emerging concerns which keep me awake at night.

And when it comes to money, it is not just about salaries. Thinking strategically and long-term is a constant challenge.

**Sustainability.** The dilemmas continue: how can we think long term about our programs when funding is intermittent? Shall we plan to open more educational centres or will the host country

policies towards refugees change? Will more refugees come through or will the borders be closed again? How can we spend money for the organizational sustainability- to further develop our hierarchies, our office, our image- when we can educate one more child with it? Really, pay for office furniture when children are freezing cold? Yes, true, we need to be sustainable, but our conscious will never be clear.

SAWA works with the community for the community and in this sense, SAWA's team is part and parcel of the Syrian communities themselves. This provides huge benefits, such as constantly coming up with solutions that match the real needs, ease in carrying out assessments, giving the voice and power to the concerned individuals, and supporting Syrians to be the sole decision-makers on issues that concern them. At the same time, it comes with its share of hardships too. Many a time, we have found ourselves discussing ideals that the Syrian revolution has taught us at the expense of making quick decisions as efficiently as per the ideal business model.

**Integrity.** We take big pride that one of our core principles, dignity, is an anchor in all of our decision making, but it inevitably triggers long debates in team meetings about the need to spotlight our work (as we live in a highly visual era, identity is important) but avoid "marketing" the crisis – as this would be against everything we believe in. Finding the middle path is often hard and very controversial. Many donors require us to document our work with sad stories, but we do not share private information or use people's misery to raise funds. But those very funds would help those same people, no? How important is people's dignity then? "But that's how the system works!" And then we find ourselves again wrapped up in another endless debate.

**Donors.** For the first three years, we decided that we were an organization that stemmed from the heart of the people, and we would not take any institutional funding. We raised cupcake money, artists like *Mashrouh Leila* and others fundraised for

us, friends from all over the world gave us money from their weddings lists, birthdays and Christmases, and six-year-old boys and girls made paintings and sold them so we could start our first school. Fair enough, but who knew the war would last that long?

**Ethics.** For these first few years, this fundraising allowed us to come up with our own programs, that were not donor driven, which best served the needs of the people. Three years in, we had grown in our scope and ambition and now needed institutional money. But this sort of big money comes with ties that risk contradicting our own principles and ideas – whether it is the decisions and policies of humanitarian donor organizations or – even more complex – money coming directly from governments with their own political agendas. Should we turn a blind eye so that we can help more people – or should we simply stick to what we believe in? A perpetual question that is never easy to answer.

**Refugee Tourism.** We have been blessed with volunteers and ambassadors who have not only been generous with their money, but who have supported us with their time, energy, hearts and skills. However, there are the few ‘volunteers’ who joined us to take pictures and feel good about themselves: crying in front of Syrians, and saying ‘*Haram*’ (Oh poor thing) in the middle of a camp; asking a young child, ‘How did your parents die?’ We now have policies and procedures in place about pictures, volunteers and interns, and induction sessions, but situations always emerge that test our patience and our wisdom.

**Constant explanations.** Syria has been on the news- for all the wrong reasons sometimes. This has brought with it a lot of unnecessary work and interest at times. In one week, if things aren’t hectic we get around 30 requests for TV interviews, consultancies, MA dissertations. While generally for the public good, at times, those requests come from ‘5 minute experts’ whereby at the end of the meeting, you find yourself

being told about what to do and how you should do it. This is not very pleasant when you have actually put off work to respond to those requests- actual work that you now have to do overtime. In other instances, you are asked, 'What is really happening in Syria?' five years into the war. Do they really not know? You ask yourself. And in splits of a second, it all comes back to you, like scenes of a film, the past almost six years now of the sacrifices of the Syrian people (dramatic music in the background and all), and you feel obliged to put off writing the proposal because you owe it to those who have given their lives to a Free Syria to at least explain the situation: OK, so in March 2011, the Syrian people went down to the streets to ask for freedom, dignity and justice (...). Right.

**Identity Crisis.** Not only do we explain the situation on the ground, but activists turned humanitarians all too often find themselves having to explain themselves. This can be to our more radical revolutionary comrades: 'our work is not depoliticizing Syria, it is an act of every day political resistance.' Or to our business/private sector friends: 'our work is not charity as you know it, it's social entrepreneurship, it's about creating jobs, sustainability, and agency.' Or to the humanitarian haters, 'No, we are not stealing donations.' Even to our own friends and family: 'Sorry I can't attend your birthday party; there have been evictions in Aleppo and we need to launch an appeal.' Those difficult conversations with our parents: 'No. I would not much rather be a banker even if it pays better.' And last but not least, explaining ourselves to ourselves, 'we are doing a good job, it is ok if it is not perfect, we are not weird, we are human beings. Maybe.'

It is the challenge of finding the energy to deal with your insecurities on a minute-by-minute basis and finding the wisdom to be your own shrink, 24/7, when the background noises in your head sound the following:

*Should I write a donor report when the world is collapsing (or maybe not?). Should I attend a wedding when all I hear about are funerals? Is it okay to be a clueless director sometimes – collapsing in front of my team – and trust that they will be there to catch me? Remember: everything takes time, nothing in this life is perfect. Remember, Rouba: in order to be compassionate to others, one needs to be compassionate to one self. Right. No, in our work, it is not competition, it is collaboration, even in times of scarcity. So what if other organizations see it this way, rise above! Calm down, calm down, the bank won't shut down, anti-terror legislation won't be bad this month, and at the end of this month you will be able to pay salaries. Put your ego aside, it is about the people. Rouba, be kind to people who think refugees are an economic-political-security threat, because part of your mission is to change their views, and because they might not know any better. Calm down. So what if iNGOs will take your staff! So what if some staff will travel by sea! So what if others give up on this type of work and go to the private sector or start organizations of their own! Remember: it is part of our mission to give people wings and for them to fly away to better places. Ok. Oh, its 4 pm, I have a Skype meeting. Or was that yesterday?*

It is learning that it is okay to shut out the background noise and remember that in the end, we need to put those questions to sleep to be able to enjoy family, love and friendships, in the time of war. If we can.